



# Weiterbildung an Hochschulen

## Der Beitrag der DGWF zur Förderung wissenschaftlicher Weiterbildung

**DGWF**

DEUTSCHE GESELLSCHAFT FÜR  
WISSENSCHAFTLICHE WEITERBILDUNG  
UND FERNSTUDIUM E.V.

GERMAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
UNIVERSITY CONTINUING AND  
DISTANCE EDUCATION



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# Working together to promote University Lifelong learning in Europe: *eucen*

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FRANÇOISE DE VIRON

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, collective knowledge, continuous learning and collaborating and learning in network are the most appropriate answer to complexity. Our environments at European, national or regional levels are rapidly changing and continuously evolving. Changes are coming from diverse perspectives: political, social, cultural, economic, and technological.

It implies that universities have to be able to continuously detect, analyse and understand these changes and they have to adapt in order to offer provisions and services to their audience -people, communities, organisations- in order to increase their learning capacity and develop their abilities to face the changes. Universities are new spaces for learning opportunities lifelong and life-wide where a new culture of learning is required.

This chapter presents *eucen*, a specific European university lifelong learning network. Using an organisational framework, based on the concepts of collaborative inter-organisational network and community of practice, it describes the characteristics, the functions and benefits of this network and highlights some prerequisites for its development. It concludes by a short test application of the framework to other networks dedicated to LLL at national level and highlights some examples in the case of Germany and the DGWF network.

## 2 What is lifelong learning at university level?

Based on its 25 years of practices and on results of European projects surveys (Davies 2007; Davies 2010), *eucen* proposes the following definition of lifelong learning at university level.

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) is the provision by higher education institutions of learning opportunities, services and research for:

- *the personal and professional development of a wide range of individuals – lifelong and life-wide*
- *and the social, cultural and economic development of communities and the region*
- *It is at university level and research-based; it focuses primarily on the needs of the learners; and it is often developed and/or provided in collaboration with stakeholders and external actors.*

Another European project led by *eucen*, DIALOGUE (de Viron 2014), identifies emergence factors for ULLL development in different European countries: the demographic changes, the increasing number of students, the pressure from labour market demands, and health care considered as strong drivers to develop ULLL. These factors are augmented by the appearance of new private universities in some countries. The emergence of the knowledge society is also outlined by DIALOGUE project partners, as it implies a major change in knowledge production and recognising that other actors besides the universities are engaged with it. *“This change forces the university to dialogue in general. In this context, academic research has a crucial role to play in validating methods used to co-create knowledge and to articulate and structure fragmented knowledge into a language that is understood by all”* (de Viron 2014, p. 5). Therefore, University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) represents *“a radical conceptual shift in thinking about education; it is distinguished for its capacity to subsume all forms of learning- formal, informal and non-formal and to provide opportunity to progress from informal learning to accredited learning in universities”* (de Viron 2014, p. 5).

Successive EUA reports (Sursock/Smidt 2010; Sursock 2015) highlight and comment the diversity in the development of University Lifelong Learning throughout European countries. What is called ‘lifelong learning’ in some countries might be called ‘adult education’, ‘postgraduate studies’ or ‘continuing education’ in others, and the content under the label vary from one country to another (de Viron/Davies 2015). The great variety of lifelong learners is also emphasised, such as young adults without a university degree, individuals seeking professional development, unemployed adults, migrants, and so on.

However, Sursock (2015) notices a strong progression in the number of European universities active in lifelong learning since 2010. *“Lifelong learning strategies are in place in 65 % of institutions and in the planning stage for a further 24 %; 9 % indicate that they are not planning one”* (Sursock 2015, p. 67). This result is based on a questionnaire to which 451 higher education institutions in 48 countries responded.

### 3 *eucen*, a network

In the University Lifelong Learning context, which is new, complex and diverse, a collaborative approach is needed for professionals. It is the main reason why *eucen*, European University Continuing Education Network, is created in 1991. *eucen* is a non-for-profit association, currently comprising 178 members, active in lifelong learning or willing to be active, from 35 European countries. Amongst these members, 150 are universities and 17 are national university networks as DGWF, the German network.

The main goals of *eucen* are twofold: first to contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of Europe through the promotion and advancement of lifelong learning within higher education institutions in Europe and elsewhere; second to foster universities' influence in the development of lifelong learning knowledge and policies throughout Europe. The *eucen* vision is a European model of lifelong learning based on democracy, equal rights and social justice (see for instance, COMMIT project, 539519-LLP-1-2013-1-BE-ERASMUS-ESIN) and contributing to economic, social and cultural needs ([www.eucen.eu](http://www.eucen.eu)).

### 4 *eucen*, a collaborative inter-organisational network

This paragraph describes *eucen* by using the concept of network in an organisational perspective. Popp et al. (2013) notice that the phenomenon of a network is now commonly understood, but the concept is not always exactly defined or referred, distinctively from partnerships or strategic alliances. Therefore, based on previous works of Provan, Fish and Sydow (2007) and Weber and Khademian (2008), Popp et al. (2013) propose a working definition highlighting collaboration and cooperation and refer to *network* when enduring exchange relations are established between members and to *collaborative inter-organizational network* when three or more organisations are involved in the network and are working together toward a common purpose.

With its 178 members, mainly universities or national networks of universities, *eucen* is obviously an inter-organisational network.

But is it a collaborative one? To answer this question, we use the typology proposed by Popp et al. (2013) in their critical review of the literature regarding inter-organisational network applied in the public sector and more specifically to the health sector. Popp et al. (2013) identify ten distinctive types of network developing distinctive functions illustrating the cooperation and collaboration within the network. To our understanding, *eucen* fulfils at least the six following functions:

1. 'Information sharing' and diffusion: *eucen* disseminates its information via its social media (i. e. LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook), via its web site and via the '*eucen* Highlights' distributed once a month and the '*eucen* Informs' newsletter published three times per year. Moreover, *eucen*'s office facilitates communication,

liaison and collaboration with other appropriate bodies and organisations active in lifelong learning or related subjects.

2. 'Knowledge generation' and exchange: *euken* writes European projects proposals in order to develop new knowledge, to identify new ideas, new framework and practices amongst project partners and to spread them to *euken* members and beyond.
3. 'Developmental': beside the information exchange, *euken* organises a specific event 'the autumn seminar' once a year, dedicated to professional development of member's teams in order to enhance their abilities to implement solutions and to solve problems. *euken* provides opportunities for LLL staff development through staff exchange and seeks opportunities for LLL student exchange.
4. 'Learning' at individual, organisational, network and community level: *euken* tries to turn any exchange, contact, or activity into a learning opportunity. The best example is probably the annual conference. But projects are also considered by partners as a learning process, as a discursive process where they learn from each other and adopt new position (see for instance the DIALOGUE project final publication in de Viron 2014).
5. 'Innovation': this function is closely connected with the 'knowledge generation' one. Via its involvement in European projects, *euken* initiates or conducts research into lifelong learning. *euken* also support members wishing to develop European LLL research. Moreover, when organising events, *euken* promotes innovation by developing and organising creative spaces where diversity and openness are at work, inviting partners or participants to create new concepts or solutions.
6. 'Policy': as a main goal, *euken* intends to represent the interests of the university lifelong learning community within higher education and to European policy-makers. For example, *euken* is involved in the LLL Platform and is one of the six VET providers Associations in the advice board for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. *euken* has recently set up an activity named '*euken* Policy Talks' dedicated to EU Policy makers and European LLL stakeholders, illustrating this function to contribute to EC Policy development.

Furthermore, it seems to us that *euken* network has two more functions, quality and professional identity, not present in typology of Popp et al. (2013).

7. 'Quality': *euken* encourages high standards in all areas of lifelong learning and strives to harmonise levels of quality for lifelong learning among its members. *euken* developed many projects dedicated to quality (as examples, EQUIPE and EQUIPE Plus projects, dedicated to European Quality in Individualised Pathways in Education).
8. 'Professional identity' and recognition: being actors in LLL development is a new profession within universities. *euken* is a convivial space where these new professionals, managers, teachers, researchers working in ULLL could meet. Members and newcomers are pleased to meet each other, exchange their points of views, explain without fear their problems or difficulties in implementing

ULLL. *eucen* is a forum of interchange, beneficial for newcomers or experts in ULLL, fostering a sense of belonging to a professional community.

Regarding these elements, we could certainly conclude that *eucen* is a collaborative inter-organisational network.

What are the potential benefits of inter-organisational networks?

Using again the framework developed by Popp et al. (2013) for the inter-organisational networks benefits, we would highlight at least three, i.e. learning, positive deviance and advocacy. We prioritise them as follows:

- Learning and capacity building are certainly the major ones, not only at the network level, but probably in the broader community of lifelong learning. Closely connected to learning benefit, innovation is also expanded via activities developed by the network.
- Positive deviance: the network provides a forum to think and act beyond the universities' norm, structure and mandate. As mentioned by Popp et al. (2013), members are able to work deliberately in deviation from their standard organisational processes, imagine new ways of thinking or doing and influence changes in current home systems. This benefit refers to the 'innovation' and 'professional identity' functions.
- Advocacy: the network legitimates positions and opinions. As outlined by Popp et al. (2013, p. 18) "*it exerts more pressure due to greater political clout and community reach resulting from greater numbers of actors and diversity of network members (Provan/Lemaire 2012)*". *eucen* network is legitimated to interact at European level, making recommendations to European institutions.

We would like to deepen the way the most important benefit of the network – i.e. learning and capacity building – expands and grows within *eucen*.

## 5 Learning: *eucen* as a Community of Practice

To examine and present the learning phenomena within *eucen*, we apply a community of practice framework (Lave/Wenger 1991; Wenger 2010).

A community of practice -in short CoP- is a group of people (usually individuals) who share a concern or a passion for something they do (the practice) and who learn how to do it better by interacting regularly (Wenger 1998).

Three fundamental items characterise a CoP: the domain, the community and the practice.

The domain characterises the relevance, the value and the purpose of the CoP. Internally, the members of the CoP agreed on the domain and are committed to it. In *eucen* case, the domain is University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), in all its forms and implementation.



The community is the social construct where the CoP members interact and build relationships, engage in joint activities and help each other. It usually requires mutual respect, common identity, willingness to share and to interact regularly. In our case, interactions and relationships take place during the events organised by *eucen*, but also virtually via mail exchanges, virtual meetings, or bilateral meetings. “A community of practice can be viewed as a social learning system” (Wenger 2010, p. 179).

The practice is a crucial characteristic as a CoP is not a community of interest. CoP members are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: lessons learned, tools used, ways of addressing recurring problems, documents and books and so on. *eucen* members are universities, i.e. organisations, but their representatives within the network are practitioners. Current representatives are (a) rector/president, vice rector/president or dean, dealing with ULLL strategies, (b) ULLL units’ managers or staff members developing provisions (c) ULLL teachers or professors and (d) researchers in ULLL or adult education.

Within *eucen*, we observe professionals committed to taking part in learning together, sharing a common culture constantly engaged in sharing experience, exchanging information and knowledge, formally (during conference for instance via presentations, posters) and informally (during the ‘open forum’ organised during conference or discussions at breaks) and contributing to a common understanding and to collective knowledge.

To our point of view, *eucen* acts as a community of practice or is a CoP as suggested by Borzillo, Probst and Rainsch (2008), who assimilate a specific form of inter-organizational network and community of practice.

During 25 years, *eucen* developed knowledge and expertise. We could affirm that a collective and common knowledge exists today. But this knowledge is largely diffused in the members’ heads and only partially structured and stored in archives and files (mainly the web site). A future challenge for this community of practice would be to organise a repository to collect, maintain and diffuse this collective knowledge and make it more explicit and visible. In this process, another challenge will be to invite the national networks as specific members of the CoP to contribute and to integrate their own collective knowledge.

What are the main benefits of CoP?

As mentioned by Wenger (Wenger 1998, p. 4), “CoP have the potential to play a vital role in supporting both formal and informal staff development because they bring together groups of people with mutually shared interests and different degrees of knowledge and experience to develop their knowledge and understanding”.

Moreover, as outlined by Jimenez-Silva and Olson (2012, p. 335), “As members of a community of practice interact, share and participate in a particular cultural practice, over time, they develop their understanding about the practice, about who they are, and about what they know in relation to the community and its goals”. This phenom-

enon certainly contributes to the development of function (7) ‘professional identity’ of *eucen* network.

Beyond the benefits, it is important to outline some prerequisites to develop effective learning within *eucen* as a CoP, i. e. the quality of the exchange content, the trust and the mutual respect of the members, the need for a culture of professional development, and the need for a language to mediate thinking about practice and to foster the dialogue between ULLL practitioners and ULLL researchers. The two first prerequisites are very frequently mentioned, see for instance Wenger (2010). The last two are highlighted by Blanton and Stylianou (2009) in their study on faculty professional development at university.

## 6 *eucen* and national networks

As mentioned before, amongst *eucen* members there are now 17 national networks from 15 countries. Learning together, exchanging good practices, influencing the national or regional environment are the main activities of these national networks. These networks are crucial relay for *eucen* as they are representative of a country or a region, understanding the legal framework and identifying the main challenges. They play a catalyst role within *eucen*.

All characteristics and benefits of networks or CoP presented in this chapter, could be applied to national networks dedicated to ULLL. From our point of view, national networks are useful instruments fulfilling at least the following functions amongst those described in paragraph 4:

- ‘Information sharing’ and diffusion: national networks are active actors in information transmission, in a bi-directional way: from national context to European one and vice-versa. They also could disseminate information largely in their country, to higher education institutions, members or not-members of *eucen*.
- ‘Quality’: a national network is a useful instrument in quality development within a country, helping all, small and large institutions to implement LLL.
- ‘Innovation’ and ‘Policy’: national networks are the place to carry out or implement organisational changes, through collegial forms of cooperation, taking into account the specific legal context.

The German Association for University Continuing and Distance Education, DGWF, is one of the leading national networks within *eucen*. DGWF is one of the first national networks, created in 1970, but also one of the largest networks with its more than 320 institutional and individual members. It is worthwhile to mention that German universities and their network had a special role in *eucen*’s creation as the German network existed before and as the first elected president of *eucen* was Prof. Peter von Mitschke-Collande from Leibniz Universität Hannover. Other German universities’ representatives have been also active within *eucen*’s Steering Committee during these last years, such as Dr. Beate Hoerr from Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz or Mr. Helmut Vogt, Akademischer Direktor at University of Hamburg.

As an illustration, we apply the framework of inter-organisational network functions developed by Popp et al. (2013) to DGWF. Starting from the activities organised by the network as described on their website (DGWF 2016 <https://dgwf.net/ueberuns/>), we establish the following correspondence between activities and functions of the network:

- Publications and documentation: in particular, the magazine ‘HOCHSCHULE UND WEITERBILDUNG’ published twice a year is a nice illustration of function (1) ‘Information sharing’
- Annual meetings, conferences, workshops, conferences and symposia contribute largely to functions (3) ‘Developmental’ and (4) ‘Learning’. The diversity of DGWF training provision and the quality of the continuing training data bases have to be emphasised.
- Advising institutions and individuals
- Recommendations and opinions: those activities contribute to functions (6) ‘Policy’, trying to impact the legal or institutional context, (7) ‘Quality’ of the lifelong and distance learning and (8) ‘Professional identity’ of the actors involved in LLL and distance learning.
- Scientifically based research and research projects promoted or supported by the network fulfil the function (2) ‘Knowledge generation’ and (5) ‘Innovation’ as “*Lifelong learning requires educational institutions to make a change of perspective ... [putting] biographical history learning processes of individuals in focus*” (DGWF, annual conference, 2016).

At first glance, DGWF appears to be a collaborative inter-organisational network fulfilling the eight functions.

## 7 Perspective for international and national networks: moving to learning organisations?

We notice that a key function and benefit of inter-organisational networks, being national or international, is learning in an environment that is closely linked to knowledge creation and innovation.

### How could networks improve this function in the future?

As mentioned before in the case of *eucen*, the development of a systematic knowledge repository is certainly a first step for improving the learning process within inter-organisational networks.

But we could do more. The learning process could be generalised moving from ‘CoP learning’ to ‘organisational learning’ that links expansion of learning, gains and creation of knowledge with improved performance (Senge 1993; Easterby-Smith/Lyles 2005; Knight/Pye 2005; Popp et al. 2013). From an organisational learning perspective, Popp et al. (2013, p. 34) suggest that “*inter-organisational networks focused on*

*learning as a critical function may well consider the value of developing internal ‘dynamic capability’ and/or ‘absorptive capacity’*”, in other words, to systemise learning in order to develop network capabilities to learn from inside, from all members or groups of members, from its past and current experience, but also to learn from outside the network, stakeholders or external actors.

Burley et al. (2012) in their study on the role of consortia developing the needed cultural and strategic shifts for a new delivery of higher educational content, suggest that the power of consortia -in our case network- to extend, expand, and exploit this learning capacity, to deploy organizational learning may represent a vast, untapped resource.

We could say that networks have the potential to become learning organisations, enabling their members to cope with changes and challenges mentioned in the introduction.

This organisational learning perspective could not take place without involving all ULLL stakeholders and mainly the lifelong learners. They are the final beneficiaries of the ULLL and the final purpose of this evolution is to improve their autonomy in learning and their capacity to act in a rapidly changing world and challenging environment.

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